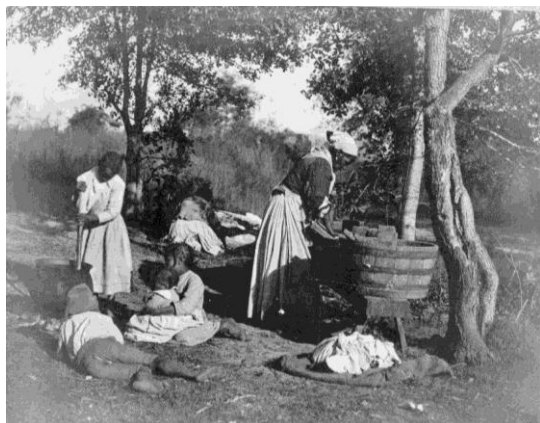ENSLAVED ON A PLANTATION:

THE LIFE OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN WASHERWOMAN

FROM THE CITY OF ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTIONS

ENSLAVED ON A PLANTATION:
THE LIFE OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN WASHERWOMAN

From left: washerwomen c. 1887 (National Archives); archaeological remnants of laundry at Shuter's Hill

Artifact Group #1 **Bale Seal,**
   Buttons, Pins, Scissors, and
   Thimble
Group #2 **Dinner/Serving Ware**
   Sherds and Pipe Fragments
Late 18th/Early 19th century
Excavated: Shuter's Hill, George
   Washington Masonic National
   Memorial

The George Washington Masonic National Memorial stands on what was known from the late 18th century as Shuter's Hill. American Indians first traversed the site more than 5,000 years ago. Then, from the 1780s until the 1840s, the Mills, Lee, and Dulany families successively operated a plantation here. At the onset of the Civil War, Union troops built two forts on the hill and occupied the plantation house.

The City of Alexandria has excavated the property since 1995. Work has uncovered the laundry outbuilding (pictured above), dating to the late 18th/ early 19th century. Finds include buttons, thimbles, needles, pins (pictured below, left), and scissors—associated with laundry activities—and thousands of unmatched ceramics for food storage and serving, plant and animal remains, and pipe fragments. These finds document that enslaved African Americans lived *and* worked in the structure.

Lead bale seal for bolt of cloth

The plantation owners relied on slaves to sew, mend, and clean their clothes. A 19th-century account describes doing laundry as an "Herculean task." Washerwomen (pictured at top) carried at least 50 gallons of water, weighing about 400 pounds, to wash, rinse, and boil just one load of clothes. According to historical documents, Esther may have been one of these women. She was enslaved to Benjamin Dulany. Esther received her freedom shortly before her death when Hannah, her sister, bought her and her three children for $1,000. The story of Esther provides a glimpse into the hard work and perseverance that led to freedom for many enslaved African Americans, whose relatives often spent years saving to purchase family members in order to free them.